

Esther 4 — For Such a Time as This — Sackcloth at the Gate, the Charge That Cannot Be Refused, and the Queen Who Chose to Perish

Esther 4: Mordecai learns of Haman's decree to annihilate the Jews, tears his clothes, and mourns in sackcloth and ashes at the king's gate while grief sweeps every province; Esther, sheltered inside the palace and unaware, sends to learn the cause, and Mordecai charges her to risk her life before the king — Persia under Ahasuerus (Xerxes I), c. 474 BC.

This is the hinge of the whole book. Three chapters have set the trap: a Persian king who rules from India to Ethiopia, a queen deposed for refusing to be displayed, a Jewish orphan raised into the harem and then the crown, and a courtier named Haman granted the power to erase an entire people because one man would not bow to him. Chapter 3 ended with the decree sealed and couriers riding: on a single appointed day, every Jew in the empire — young and old, women and children — is to be destroyed. And then the last line of chapter 3 sits there like a stone: "the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed" (Esther 3:15). The men who signed the death warrant went to dinner.

Hebrew Word Studies

saq (H8242) (שָׂק) — **sackcloth — coarse goat-hair cloth worn against the skin in grief vv. 1, 2, 3, 4.** Sackcloth threads through the opening of this chapter four times — Mordecai puts it on (v. 1), it bars him from the gate (v. 2), the provinces lie in it (v. 3), and Esther tries to take it off him (v. 4). *Saq* is not a garment so much as a confession worn on the body: rough, dark, deliberately uncomfortable, the outward sign of a soul that has stopped pretending it is fine. It is the cloth Jacob wore for a son he thought was dead (Gen. 37:34), the cloth a whole pagan city put on — even the cattle — when Jonah preached (Jonah 3:6–8), the cloth the psalmist made his clothing that his prayer might be heard (Ps. 35:13). Sackcloth is grief made honest and public, and scripture never treats it as faithlessness. The Lord himself receives it: "thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness" (Ps. 30:11). The Restoration keeps the same instinct — that real repentance and real petition come with fasting and "a broken heart and a contrite spirit" (3 Ne. 9:20; D&C 59:8). What is missing in Esther is not the mourning; it is the named God the mourning is usually aimed at. The book shows us the sackcloth and, for now, withholds the Name.

'eth (H6256) (עֵת) — **time, season, the right or appointed moment v. 14.** "'For such a time as this" turns on *'eth* — not clock-time but *the fitting moment*, the appointed juncture when everything converges. It is the same word behind Ecclesiastes' great litany, "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven" (Eccl. 3:1) — a time to keep silence and a time to speak (3:7), and Esther stands exactly on that seam. *'Eth* is providential vocabulary: it names a moment that was made for something, a hinge in history that a life was prepared to meet. Mordecai's genius is to hand Esther not a command but a question about her *'eth* — what if the whole strange path that put a Jewish orphan on the Persian throne was aimed at *this* season? The Restoration reads every life this way: souls "prepared... for such a time as this" is the doctrine of Jeremiah 1:5 and Abraham 3:22–23, of a Savior who came "in the meridian of time" (D&C 20:26) precisely when the fulness of the times required. The word insists that moments are not random; some of them are appointments. Esther's courage is to recognize her *'eth* and step into it.

revach (H7305) (רֵבַח) — **enlargement, relief, respite, breathing-room v. 14.** The KJV renders it "enlargement," paired with "deliverance" — "then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place." *Revach* is a beautiful, physical word: it comes from the root for *breath* and *space*, the idea of room opening up, of a spirit that could not breathe suddenly able to. It is relief that feels like air after suffocation — the opposite of the closing walls of a decree. And it is the word Mordecai chooses for the rescue whose source he will not name. The covenant people, pressed to the point of extinction, will be given room to breathe again "from another place." That refusal to say from where is the loudest silence in the Old Testament: everyone knows the enlargement can come from only One, and the book will not print his name. It is the same divine reflex the Psalms make explicit — "I called upon the LORD in distress: the LORD answered me, and set me in a large place" (Ps. 118:5); "thou hast enlarged me when I was in distress" (Ps. 4:1). Esther gives us the *revach* and hides the Giver in plain sight. The Restoration names him without flinching: the God who promises the covenant people that "I will... ease your burdens... that even you cannot feel them upon your backs" (Mosiah 24:14–15). Breathing-room from another place is providence's signature, and Mordecai signs it in invisible ink.

***tsum* / *tsom* (H6684 / H6685) (צָוֹם / צָוִם) — to fast; a fast — abstaining from food as an act of petition and humbling vv. 3,**

16. The verb *tsum* (v. 16, "fast ye") and its noun *tsom* (v. 3, "fasting") frame the covenant people's response to the decree. Everywhere else in scripture a fast this severe is aimed at God by name — Jehoshaphat "proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah" and cried, "O our God, wilt thou not judge them?" (2 Chr. 20:3, 12); Joel commands, "sanctify a fast... and cry unto the LORD" (Joel 1:14). Esther calls the same fast and names no one. The act is complete; only the object is left in silence — the book's signature reticence at its sharpest. Yet the meaning is unmistakable, because in the whole biblical vocabulary fasting is never mere hunger: it is petition with the body, humbling made physical, the soul turned toward heaven through an empty stomach. The Restoration keeps fasting exactly here — as covenant petition. Alma's people "fast and pray oft" (Alma 45:1); the sons of Mosiah "had given themselves to much prayer, and fasting" before their great mission (Alma 17:3); the Nephites at the temple fasted so their "faith" and "hearts" would be knit to God (compare Omni 1:26, "offer your whole souls as an offering unto him"). Fasting is how covenant people ask when asking must cost something. Esther's fast costs three days of water in a desert empire — the whole soul laid on the altar of a petition to a God the text will not name but everyone fasting can feel.

***'abad* (H6) (אָבָד) — to perish, be destroyed, be lost vv. 14, 16.** 'One word binds the two halves of Esther's decision. In verse 14 Mordecai warns that if she stays silent, "thou and thy father's house shall be *destroyed*" — *'abad*. In verse 16 she answers, "if I *perish*, I *perish*" — the same root, twice. The threat and the surrender share a verb, and the sharing is the point: the annihilation Esther fears is the annihilation she now accepts the risk of, in order to prevent it for others. *'Abad* is the strong, final word for ruin — the perishing of the wicked "way" in Psalm 1:6, the "lost" sheep the shepherd goes after (Ezek. 34:4, 16), the destruction the covenant is meant to hold back. What Esther does is take the verb meant for her people onto herself: rather than let *them* perish, she walks into the place where *she* might. That substitution — one life stepping into the danger to spare many — is the shape of every deliverer, and its fullest expression is the One who came so "that whosoever believeth in him should not *perish*, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16), who taught that "whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Matt. 16:25). Esther's doubled *'abad* is a small, human foreshadow of a Savior who chose to perish that his people might not.'

From the Chapter's Architecture

The chapter also turns on a precise reversal of authority. It begins with Mordecai as the source of every charge and Esther as the sheltered recipient; it ends with Esther issuing the commands and Mordecai obeying "according to all that Esther had commanded him" (v. 17). The pupil has become the leader in the space of seventeen verses, and the pivot is verse 14 — the moment Mordecai stops instructing and starts asking ("who knoweth?"). He hands her the decision, and in taking it she takes the crown's true weight for the first time. And beneath the whole structure runs the book's deliberate silence, thickening as the stakes rise: fasting without a named God in verse 3, deliverance "from another place" in verse 14, a total fast aimed at no one spoken in verse 16. The architecture builds toward the sacred and, at the summit, leaves the holiest word unsaid — trusting the reader, and the fasting people, to supply it.